

# Educating Nurses at the College of The Bahamas

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the first decade following Bahamian Independence in 1973, registered nurse education transformed from a professional training programme offered by the Ministry of Health's Department of Nursing Education into an academic discipline offered at The College of The Bahamas. The College of The Bahamas began offering an Associate of Arts degree in Nursing in the early 80s, with its first class graduating at the 1986/87 commencement. The diploma and degree programmes operated in tandem, sharing a campus until the Ministry of Health nursing diploma programme was phased out. Its last graduation ceremony was held in 1993. The nursing programme offered by COB evolved from an Associate of Arts to an Associate of Science in Nursing degree and later, in the 2000s, to a Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree. This paper will trace the development of nurse education programmes in the Bahamas from their beginnings to date, highlighting the milestones and achievements.

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## **Nurse Training in the Bahamas, 1903-1973**

Formal nurse training commenced in the Bahamas in 1898 when a trained nurse was engaged by the House of Assembly through the Colonial Nursing Association (CNA), a charitable organization set up to recruit British nurses to work in hospitals located throughout the British Empire. Among her many duties, the trained nurse was required to train nurses to work in the hospital. The first class of 12 students (nine females and three males) began their training in 1903 and three years later, four female nurses graduated, becoming the first locally "certificated" nurses. They were

Catherine Cooper, Ellen Edwards, Theresa Major and Laura Sawyer.

Nurse training was difficult: students lived in a residence on the hospital grounds and worked long hours, including night duty. They attended lectures on anatomy and medicine given by the Resident Surgeon and lectures on nursing topics by the Matron or head nurse.

The apprenticeship model of nurse training in The Bahamas remained virtually unchanged until the middle of the 20th century. Reforms in nursing education and training were slow to be implemented. The hospital-based

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programme, firmly under the control of the matron or “home sister”, provided the hospital with free labour. The trainee nurses were regarded as employees rather than students, a status which did not change until the 1980s. The numbers of graduate nurses remained low for several reasons. Many of the applicants for the nursing programme could not read and write or they had only a rudimentary education. However, as basic education levels improved in The Bahamas in the early part of the 20th century, a larger pool of potential candidates emerged and nursing was one of few professions to which middle-class women might aspire (Craton & Saunders, 1998, p. 253).

Another problem was that in the early years of the 20th century, The Bahamas House of Assembly, as was the case in most countries of the British Empire, simply did not hire enough CNA nurses to both manage training of nurses and provide nursing care in the hospital (Jones, 2008). By the 1920s there were usually three or four CNA nurses in The Bahamas General Hospital and the training programme was more successful. It was not until 1950 when a qualified nurse tutor was recruited through the CNA that the nurse training programme was moved from under the supervision of the Matron of The Bahamas General Hospital and into a nurse training department.

#### **Reciprocity with the General Nursing Council of England and Wales**

After World War II, nursing was recognized as a discipline that merited inclusion in the universities; however, the complete transition from hospital-apprenticeship to the ivory tower in the Caribbean was fraught with challenges. Caribbean nurse leaders met frequently throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s to discuss regional reforms to nurse education, and standards of nursing care for the region (Ballance, 2005, p. 82). In 1958, nurse education in The Bahamas was

restructured to follow the British Preliminary Training School model, which consisted of a four-year programme including one year of midwifery training. The Preliminary Training School used a “block system”, in which the student nurses spent several weeks in the classroom learning theoretical and practical skills before they were allocated on the wards where they could apply their knowledge and hone their practical skills. Each block of between four and eight weeks addressed a particular medical area or type of patient. Revision of the curriculum resulted in the programme being more structured and pedagogically sound. From 1964 students graduating from the Bahamian Preliminary Training School had the option of proceeding to Britain for a year of further training that allowed them to be registered with the General Nursing Council for England and Wales; they would then become professional nurses with State Registered Nurse (SRN) and State Certified Midwife (SCM) designation.

A team of nurse educators from Jamaica and Great Britain evaluated the Bahamian nursing programme in 1969 and deemed it equivalent to those accredited through the General Nursing Council for England and Wales. Reciprocity allowed Bahamian-trained nurses to apply to the General Nursing Council for England and Wales for SRN registration without having to sit examinations. This achievement paved the way for the Ministry of Health to establish a Department of Nursing Education which could offer a professional or registered nurse programme. Reciprocity gave the Bahamian programme legitimacy and confirmed that a recognized standard of education – albeit that of the colonizer – had been achieved.

Work began immediately to revise the existing Midwives Act of 1926 and establish a regulatory body for nursing. The Nurses and Midwives Act of 1971 set up the statutory framework for the Nursing Council of the

Commonwealth of The Bahamas as the body to grant nursing licences in The Bahamas. The Nursing Council also regulates and evaluates nursing schools, develops the curriculum, and sets the registration examinations for nurses, midwives and clinical nurses.

Nursing education and practice in The Bahamas has been profoundly influenced by Britain. The Colonial Nursing Association sent nurses to The Bahamas from 1898 until 1966. To recognize the contribution of the Colonial Nursing Association matrons, nursing student dorms and nurse's residences on the Princess Margaret Hospital grounds were named in honour of Matrons Ada Blake (1925-1927), Annie Baines (1928-1945), Margaret Batchelder (1945-1952), and Denise Dane (1952-1958).

From the mid-1940s Britain began offering scholarships for nurses and other professionals under the Colonial Development and Welfare Scheme, with the objective that they should return to their countries and assume positions of responsibility. Hilda Bowen was the first Bahamian to go to Britain for nurse training, leaving in 1945 and returning to The Bahamas in 1953 with State Registered Nurse (SRN), State Registered Midwife (SRM) qualifications as well as specialty training in ophthalmology (Ballance, 2002). As a result, the nursing profession in The Bahamas was nearly "Bahamianized" before Independence. By the early 1960s, Bahamian nurses with British SRN qualifications were already occupying key positions in the hospital and later, within the Ministry of Health hierarchy. Hilda Bowen was appointed Assistant Hospital Matron in 1962 and went on to become Principal Matron in 1965 and thereafter all hospital matrons were Bahamian. She was appointed Chief Nursing Officer in 1970 and Director of Nursing for the country in 1980, positions that were created for her and which allowed her to influence the

development of the nursing profession in The Bahamas (Gray, Storr, Roberts, & Johnson, 2001, p. 17). It was Hilda Bowen's vision that nursing should be taught in a college or university and as Director of Nursing she was instrumental in furthering that goal. In the realm of nursing education, Ironaca Morris was appointed Principal Nursing Tutor in 1966 and nearly all nursing tutors since then have been Bahamian.

### **Nursing Education, 1973-2014**

In the past 40 years, nursing education has continued to evolve, building on the foundation from the pre-Independence era. The first step entailed moving nurse education out of the hospital into a classroom and employing dedicated nurse educators. A second important achievement was moving the programmes out of the Ministry of Health and into the College of The Bahamas (COB), which allowed the programme to be upgraded from a diploma to an academic degree. A third achievement was the upgrading of nursing faculty qualifications from predominantly Advanced Nursing Education certificates to doctoral degrees. And finally, the School of Nursing and Allied Health Professions has taken measures to reinstate or reinforce nursing traditions in the university environment.

#### *From Hospital to Classroom*

In May 1972, the Department of Nursing Education moved from its cramped quarters in Dane's Nurses Home on the grounds of the Princess Margaret Hospital to a renovated post office warehouse on Sands Lane, a short walk from the hospital. The three-story building provided two large and two small classrooms along with a library/study hall that doubled as a conference room for departmental meetings. Even though the Department of Nursing Education was better off in their new location, the space was still too small to accommodate the nurse education classes, faculty and students comfortably.

Principal Nursing Tutor, Ironaca Morris lamented in her speech at the Nurses Graduation in 1980 that the school had outgrown its accommodations within a year of moving in.

Gray et al. (2001) note that nurse educators and administrators lobbied for 27 years: writing memos, position papers, briefing notes, and grant applications, to convince government authorities that nursing education needed a purpose-built facility and to convince them that it would be worth the investment. Funds for such a project in The Bahamas were acquired through a loan of \$1.44 million from the World Bank in 1981. This was the first phase of a project to improve facilities for technical and vocational education in The Bahamas (World Bank, 1981). And, finally, in June 1987 the new Bahamas School of Nursing building at the top of Grosvenor Close was opened (Associate degree in nursing, 1987, p. 4).

The new nursing school was located adjacent to the Princess Margaret Hospital, and included two hospital ward-classrooms with training mannequins, teaching classrooms and seminar rooms, a lecture theatre, a library, an administration block, meeting rooms, a student common room and faculty offices. It was foreseen that the new facilities would accommodate 250 students in the registered and clinical nursing programmes. In a speech presented at the nursing graduation ceremony in 1988, Principal Nursing Officer, Jennie Isaacs proudly reported that the new building greatly enhanced the teaching and learning environment for nursing.

#### *From Diploma to Degree*

The syllabus of the Registered Nurse diploma programme was reviewed in 1975 and was adjusted to meet the requirements of the Nursing Council of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas. The programme's former vocational approach to learning was refocused

to give the graduate of the RN programme a sound knowledge of nursing as well as competency and knowledge of national health care policies, epidemiology, health promotion and education, nursing and administration, community health, problem solving and interpersonal communication skills (Reid, 1982, p. 173).

In 1982, officials from the COB and the Ministry of Health met to discuss the possibility of COB offering an associate-level degree in nursing as the first step toward the eventual transfer of all nurse training to COB. The existing nursing syllabus was integrated to meet the curricular requirements of COB and in the autumn of 1984, COB offered an Associate of Arts (A.A.) degree in Nursing through the Natural Sciences Division (Bethel, 2010, p. 33). During the transition period, 1984-1991 until the diploma programme was phased out, the two programmes ran in tandem, and all faculty of the Department of Nursing Education had the opportunity to teach in the COB nursing programme (Bethel, 2010, p. 34).

One of the results of the move of the programme from diploma to degree was a schism in the profession, between the "book nurse" and the "hands on nurse". This split was perhaps more imagined than real because the College-educated nursing students had to complete the same number of clinical internship (practical) hours as the diploma nurse before being permitted to write the Nursing Council's registration examination. This struggle has been observed elsewhere in the world and studies show that there is no great difference in the competency levels of nurses (Clinton, Murrells, & Robinson, 2005).

### *Faculty Qualifications*

The second stage of the World Bank's Technical and Vocational Training Project (World Bank Loan 3004-BM) was to provide consultants and support for The Bahamas School of Nursing to carry out an institutional self-study. The self study evaluated the curriculum and analysed all aspects of the programme, personnel and facilities. It concluded that the advantages of merging with COB was that the nurses would earn an accredited degree and a university-based programme would set the stage for entry-to-professional nursing education to move to the baccalaureate level. Other advantages cited were improvements to the library and teaching resources, more opportunities for faculty to engage in research and continuing education (p. 49). Of over-riding concern with the move into an institution of higher learning was that nursing should "maintain its identity and to continue to grow as a profession" (Bahamas School of Nursing, 1991, p. 60).

The Department of Nursing Education and Bahamas School of Nursing lecturers had to upgrade their academic qualifications, update the curriculum and upgrade the teaching facilities. Many attended the University of the West Indies to complete the Advanced Nursing Education Certificate, several completed bachelor-level degrees and two of the faculty completed Master's degrees in nursing and public health.

### **From NUHS Division to SNAHP**

In 1991, The Bahamas School of Nursing RN diploma programme was phased out according to plan and was replaced by the Associate of Science in Nursing programme (ASN) offered through COB. The Nursing and Health Sciences Division (NUHS) of the COB was established as the home division for COB's existing allied health programmes in Medical Technology and Environmental Health as well as Nursing. The NUHS Division was located at the former Bahamas School of Nursing

campus, which was renamed the Grosvenor Close Campus of the College of The Bahamas. The first chair of the NUHS Division was Cecile Knowles and Principal Nursing Officer Jennie Isaacs, formerly the head of The Bahamas School of Nursing, became the Provost of the Grosvenor Close Campus. In her final annual report for The Bahamas School of Nursing, Isaacs remarked that it took 12 years to get nursing into COB.

One of the major incentives to move the nursing programme out of the Ministry of Health and out of the hospital was the opportunity for it to evolve into a university-level degree. Given the demand for Bachelor degreed nurses, a post-RN registration programme leading to the Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) was designed and commenced in 1995. This programme was a bridge to allow Bahamian nurses with the RN diploma or an Associate-level nursing degree to earn a Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree locally. It also allowed the newly-established Nursing and Health Sciences Division to lay the groundwork to move toward a generic BSN programme.

The ASN curriculum was designed and integrated into the COB frame for undergraduate education. "Force-fitting" a professional degree into the constraints of a general undergraduate degree revealed that the number of credits students were required to complete for the ASN were very nearly equal to what was expected of most BSN programmes in the United States. Fitting a demanding nursing curriculum with many prerequisites and co-requisites into an undergraduate framework is a challenge and a viable curriculum model that can accommodate the needs of a nursing programme is necessary (Branadat & Chalmers, 1989, p. 724). A further constraint was that the Nursing Council of The Bahamas, nursing's regulatory body, required a specific number of practical clinical experience hours

before pupil nurses could write the Nursing Council examinations. Having completed undergraduate degree requirements, nursing students then spent a further 10 months on a clinical internship. When the COB nursing programme was evaluated by the Regional Nursing Body in 2000, they recommended that the internship component be integrated into the Associate and proposed generic Bachelor degree programmes.

As the practice of nursing has become more complex, the next step in nursing education was to upgrade the entry-to-practice level and offer a “generic” Bachelor of Science degree in nursing. Part of the pressure to move to offering only the BSN was that Associate level degrees from the COB had to fit into a two-year frame, which posed a challenge because the Nursing Council requires a minimum of 3 years for basic nurse education in The Bahamas. Therefore in 2005, the School of Nursing began phasing out the Associate of Science in Nursing degree. One last cohort of students was admitted into a special revised

Associate of Science degree in the Fall of 2005 and effort was made to ensure that students enrolled in the ASN degree programmes were able to complete their credits and internships and meet the graduation requirements. From the autumn of 2006 onward, all incoming students were admitted to a generic Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree programme and the first cohort graduated on schedule in 2011. Thus, the BSN became the entry-level programme at the COB and the entry-level to practice nursing within the Bahamian health care system. The School of Nursing and Allied Health Professions was then juggling students in four degree programmes: the ASN, the revised ASN, the RN-to-BSN and the generic BSN programme. There would be about three years of overlap, as the last students completed credits for their ASN degrees and students in the first generic BSN students moved through their programme.

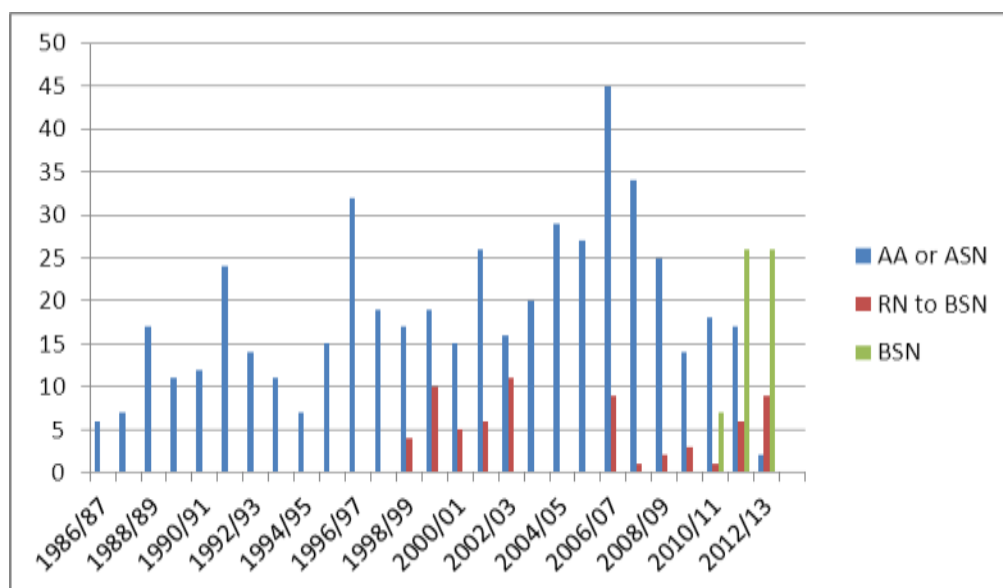


Figure 1. Numbers of students graduated with Associate of Arts in Nursing (1986-1991), Associate of Science in Nursing (1992-2011), RN-BSN (1998-) and BSN (2010-) from College of The Bahamas programmes

### **Technology and Innovation**

Nursing education includes a large component of practical skills for students to learn and become competent at performing. Audio-visuals, pictures, models, videos, or virtual reality technologies are used extensively in nursing and medical education to enhance teaching and learning. When the Bahamas School of Nursing opened in 1987 medical models (i.e. the ear, the eye, the heart) were donated by the British High Commission as was a massive collection of filmstrips and projectors. As audio-visual technology evolved, the static filmstrips and cassettes were replaced with VHS videos and televisions.

In 2008 the Rotary International service organization donated five computerized SimMan® Laerdal advanced patient simulator mannequins for the clinical practical rooms on the Grosvenor Close Campus. Two years later they followed up with a donation of 100 educational DVD titles along with multimedia projectors and DVD viewers to support nursing education. Other technological innovations include the use of computers, a computer laboratory, and a wide range of audio visual equipment for faculty and students to use to enhance teaching and learning experiences. Many courses use internet-based course management systems (such as Blackboard and Moodle) in addition to face-to-face lectures to support learning. In 2011 a course in Nursing Informatics was added to the RN-BSN curriculum, recognizing the role of technology in nursing education and practice.

### **Educational Grant**

Bowleg and Stuart's 1994 report estimating the number of nurses needed in The Bahamas in the coming decade focused largely on nurse education and the retention of nurses in the healthcare system (p. 44). The Ministry of Health and COB followed

through on a number of the report's recommendations, such as launching a marketing campaign to attract students into nursing (particularly students from the Family Islands and male students), offering post-RN specialty programmes and Trained Clinical Nurse programmes more frequently, and raising the amount of the educational grant for nursing students to equal that offered to police cadets and trainee teachers.

### **Faculty development**

When the nursing programme was transferred to COB, faculty development continued to be an important goal. All faculty were required to have at least a BSN degree in order to teach in the nursing programme. Many faculty members in the newly established Nursing and Health Sciences Division had RN/RM and Advanced Nursing Education Certificates. All faculty were encouraged to upgrade their academic qualifications, and several took the first step by completing the RN-to-BSN programme at COB or the BSN at University of the West Indies in Jamaica. Several COB nurse educators completed a Master's in Health Administration offered through the University of Western Connecticut in 1999-2000 or the MSN at the University of the West Indies. The first COB nursing faculty members to complete doctoral-level degrees were Drs. Zorene Curry and Shane Neely-Smith in 2003. They were followed by Drs. Shirley Curtis, Elizabeth Williams, Ingrid Gibson-Mobley and Theresa Moxey-Adderley who completed doctoral studies in 2011 and early 2012, all from universities in South Florida. With all COB nursing faculty having degrees at the master and doctoral levels, the School of Nursing is now well situated to offer master's degrees in nursing.

Another advantage to having nursing in a university was that faculty would have the opportunity to conduct research and write academic scholarly articles for publication.

The first published research paper was Dean's 1994 study of Associate Degree student achievement, followed by a groundbreaking study on pain management knowledge by Neely-Smith, Turner, Curry, Moxey-Adderley, Wilson, & Smith in 2003. Research skills are threaded throughout the BSN programme. Nursing students become familiar with reading and applying research in their courses. They design research studies, collect data, and analyze their results, thereby gaining research experience that will help them with further education or administration, and with work in evidence-based practice environments.

### *Student Uniforms*

Socialization of the student nurse into a professional programme includes the development of the identity as a nurse, which includes wearing a student nurse uniform. The student nurse uniform in The Bahamas was modelled on that used in Britain: a pale blue short-sleeved buttoned dress with a white peter-pan collar and white cuffs. Until the programme moved to the College of The Bahamas, a starched apron was worn over the uniform. While the programme was part of the Ministry of Health, the student uniform was government property. Uniforms were laundered and starched by the hospital laundry. Students lived by a strict code: they were not permitted to wear their uniform outside of the hospital precincts, should not be seen eating, drinking or smoking while wearing the uniform. In 2013-14 a white smock with the College crest embroidered on the left shoulder was introduced. Student nurses wear a white nurse's cap, white stockings, and white shoes. They must also have their College identification pin, scissors, a wristwatch with a second hand, a small ruler, notebook, pens, and a stethoscope while on ward duty. Their hair must be pulled back, fingernails free of polish and earrings should be small.

As nursing education enters its 25th year at COB, it has made adjustments to be able to function within the university structure and adapt to nursing's unique culture. Coming from a profession with long-held traditions before moving into academia, nursing has had to adapt and, in some senses, forge a new identity in the process. Nursing students must wear their uniform while on the wards, but they are not required to do so when attending classes. At graduation, they wear the academic gown and cap and the academic hood, but not their nurse's uniform, cap, and white gloves. Student nurses no longer live together in the dorm or nurse's residence but may live at home and commute to school. In the past these shared experiences and rituals in the hospital, in the classroom and in the nurse's residence helped build their identity as nurses and forge their professional socialization. In the university and course-credit system students no longer stay with their "block". In response to losing some of the traditions and sense of identity, in 2005 the School of Nursing and Allied Health Professions designed a school pin and introduced a Nurses Pinning Ceremony into the annual College commencement activities. This annual event has helped instill a sense of identity and accomplishment as graduates transition from students to professional nurses.

### **Nursing Education in 21st Century Bahamas**

What will the next 40 years bring to nursing education at The College of The Bahamas? Will the nursing programme continue to evolve along the American rather than British model? Will Master's degrees in nursing be offered through the University of The Bahamas? Or will the university offer specialist nursing degrees, such as that of Nurse Practitioner? Has the School of Nursing and Allied Health Professions outgrown its present location? Does the



School of Nursing and Allied Health Professions need a new larger building and updated facilities? Could a new School of Nursing and Allied Health Professions include a whole hospital floor with mannequins for practical experiences? Can more technology be integrated into the curriculum? Will there be more inter-professional educational experiences – where student nurses, student doctors, student pharmacists, and students of other allied health professions learn together in an educational setting outside of the hospital?

## Conclusions

Nursing education in The Bahamas has made great strides since it moved from being a hospital-based to an academic programme. Within two years of becoming a College programme, the RN-BSN degree was offered, and within 20 years the nursing degree had evolved into a Bachelor of Science degree. Faculty have upgraded their qualifications and there are now four professors with doctoral degrees in the department and all others have masters-level degrees.

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